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ABSTRACT

This article provides results about a high school's support for its peer mediation program and the effectiveness of that program. The four subject groups surveyed included faculty, students in eight home room classes, trained student mediators, and students who had used the program to resolve an interpersonal conflict. Individuals directly involved with the peer-mediation program were more satisfied with it versus those who had no direct experience. Responses from the four subject groups indicated the idea of a peer-run conflict resolution program was appealing; however, many students had not used the program over a one-year period. A possible reason cited for low program usage was a lack of information about the program. Suggestions to improve the program are listed. (Author)

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An Evaluation of a High School Peer Mediation Program

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Abstract

This article provides results about a high school's support for its peer mediation program and the effectiveness of that program. The four subject groups surveyed included faculty, students in eight home room classes, trained student mediators, and students who had used the program to resolve an interpersonal conflict. Individuals directly involved with the peer-mediation program were more satisfied with it versus those who had no direct experience. Responses from the four subject groups indicated the idea of a peer-run conflict resolution program was appealing; however, many students had not used the program over a one-year period. A possible reason cited for low program usage was a lack of information about the program. Suggestions to improve the program have been listed in this report.

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The incidence of violent acts performed by individuals under the age of 25 continues to rise. Many of the crimes committed by this age group are occurring within school settings. Research indicates that many conflicts are handled inappropriately by students. As schools desperately seek ways to prevent destructive acts, many are turning towards conflict resolution programs (Johnson, Johnson, Dudley & Acikogz, 1994; Lane & McWhirter, 1992; Meek, 1992; Stomfay-Stitz, 1994).

Conflict resolution is a peace-oriented strategy used to deal with interpersonal disputes peacefully. Direct communication is the key to elicit the concerns, thoughts, and beliefs of the individuals involved in a dispute (Community Board Program, 1987; Cutrona & Guerin, 1994; Meek, 1992). The goal is for people to use communication skills as a way to achieve a compromise that is agreeable to all parties involved (Johnson & Johnson, 1995). Conflict resolution programs within schools have increased 40% since 1991 (Shepherd, 1994). There appears to be multiple benefits for the individuals who are involved with the programs. These include increased understanding of self and others, broadened views related to different cultural and ethnic groups, promoting healthy development and psychological growth and learning skills that foster cooperation rather than competition (Community Board Program, 1987; Horowitz & Boardman, 1995; Johnson & Johnson, 1995).

Peer mediation is a form of conflict resolution that is based on the foundation of applied conflict resolution. Designed specifically for elementary, middle, and high school students, the goal is to empower them to share responsibility for creating a safe, secure school environment, rather than placing the sole responsibility on teachers, principals, and counselors (Morse & Andrea, 1994; Shepherd, 1994). Peer Mediators are students who have been selected by their peers and faculty members to assist other students in the conflict resolution process. A variety of students can be trained to use the skills outlined in peer mediation models, allowing them to work effectively with fellow students (Cutrona & Guerin, 1994; Lane & McWhirter, 1992).

Peer mediation appears to benefit the student body, students trained as mediators, faculty members, and administrators. Principals, counselors, and teachers spend less time dealing with student discord. Violence and acts of crime appear to be declining in the schools where mediation has been implemented. There are personal benefits for individuals as well. Enhanced self-esteem, better attendance, and

development of leadership and problem-solving skills occur as a result of being trained as a mediator (Benson & Benson, 1993; Cutrona & Guerin, 1994).

These types of conflict resolution programs are receiving support by schools. Several studies indicate that these programs are meeting their desired goals. Students having access to mediation services are using the programs and reporting success. They are able to reach peaceful agreements and are maintaining those agreements at least two weeks later. Student to student conflicts are also decreasing in number. This is evidenced by the declining number of fights and suspensions (Burrell & Vogl, 1990; Crary, 1992; Johnson & Johnson, 1994; Meek, 1992).

The purpose of this study was to determine if the peer mediation program at Medical Lake High School is effective in helping students solve their interpersonal conflicts. This program is based on Talk Peace: Resolving Conflicts Through Mediation (Schrumpf, 1994). Results were used to help improve the program, which has only been in operation since January of 1996. The high school currently serves 630 students in grades nine through twelve.

It was hypothesized that students who use peer mediation will resolve interpersonal conflicts peacefully and will maintain the agreed upon resolution successfully. Success was defined as 85% of participants maintaining their written agreement. The success rate of 85% was based on research findings from peer mediation programs that have been evaluated. It was also hypothesized that the peer mediation program at Medical Lake High School has broad based support from faculty members and students.

Method

A needs assessment based on self-report surveys by four different subject groups was proposed. Permission to survey students was obtained by the Human Subjects Review Board at Eastern Washington University and by the school principal at Medical Lake High School (MLHS). Within a one-week period, faculty members, students from eight random home rooms, students trained as peer mediators, and students who had used peer mediation to work out a conflict filled out surveys. The majority of questions on the surveys were designed for a specific group. However, one question remained the same across surveys to allow direct comparison between them. Verbal scripts were used with each group to ensure continuity by the researcher and a statement informing subjects of their rights was printed at the top of each survey.

Faculty members were approached during a morning staff meeting. They were informed of the nature of the survey and its significance for MLHS. It was stated that participation was voluntary, that individuals should not identify themselves, and that results would be reported to them at a later date. Most faculty members completed and returned surveys before leaving the meeting. Others delivered them to a designated faculty box by the end of the school day.

Students in home rooms were also surveyed. Home rooms were randomly chosen by obtaining a list of potential first period classes, and selecting eight. The teachers of the eight home room classes were approached the same morning. Each teacher was asked to distribute the survey forms to their first period students the following morning. They were asked to allow students to use the first ten minutes of class to complete the surveys. All eight teachers agreed to the request. Manila envelopes containing scripts and surveys were delivered to each teacher's mail box at the end of the same day. Prior to distribution the following day, teachers were required to read a script to help protect subject rights as well as provide a common experience for all participating students. It was arranged that all surveys, completed as well as blank, would be returned to the manila envelope and collected by the first period student aide.

Student mediators were asked to complete surveys during a scheduled lunch time peer mediation meeting. Only mediators who attended the meeting were used as subjects. No attempt was made to contact those who were unable to attend the meeting. Students were asked to complete a survey form. They were informed that participation was voluntary, and were instructed to refrain from identifying themselves. Completed as well as blank surveys were placed in a manila envelope and the group advisor returned them immediately following the meeting.

Individuals who had participated in a mediation to resolve an interpersonal conflict between January 1, 1996 and January 1, of 1997, were targeted as subjects to represent the fourth group. At MLHS, each peer mediation that takes place is recorded on a form that is placed in a designated three-ring binder. Each form allows mediators to record information about the nature of the situation, the date of the mediation, names of all parties involved, the agreement or lack of agreement reached, signatures of participants, and the length of time used to reach a solution. From these forms, names of individuals who had used the mediation service were collected and made up the fourth group. All names on the

survey forms were coded by number on the forms to protect the identity of the students. These students were then approached on an individual basis and asked to participate. A statement describing the purpose of the study and individual rights was read to each student. Those who agreed were directed to complete the survey in a private location and place the completed form into a manila envelope when finished.

The purpose of the surveys was to find out the level of support for the peer mediation program at MLHS and to assess the degree to which it was effective in helping students solve interpersonal conflicts. Faculty members, students from eight random home rooms, trained peer mediators, and students who had used peer mediation to help solve an interpersonal conflict made up the four subject groups targeted for the study. Each survey form contained items specific to the respective subject group. Most items were phrased in a forced-choice format. There were several items, however, requesting opinions, thoughts, and concerns from respondents. One particular item remained the same on all four surveys allowing for comparison across the different groups.

Surveys were completed by 165 students in the eight randomly selected home room classes. When asked who they would most likely go to for help with an interpersonal conflict, the majority reported they would seek out a friend. A very small percentage responded that peer mediation would be their choice. A large number of students reported they were aware of the peer mediation program at MLHS. Over half of the respondents indicated they had been involved in some type of interpersonal conflict in the last six months, but only a small percentage used peer mediation to solve it. Satisfaction with the peer mediation program ranged from 1 to 10. One was equivalent to low satisfaction and 10 was equivalent to high satisfaction. The 165 students reported a moderate level of satisfaction (4.7).

Faculty members were surveyed and the 25 who completed the survey were aware that MLHS had a peer mediation program. Most responded that they believed having a peer-based conflict resolution program was important, yet when asked if they would refer students involved in a dispute to peer mediation, the majority indicated they were not likely to do so. Furthermore, only a small percentage had ever recommended the service to students. Satisfaction with the program was moderate (5.2).

Of the 39 students surveyed who had used peer mediation to help solve an interpersonal conflict, a high percentage believed the service was useful. Most maintained their agreements, responded that they would

be apt to use the service in the future, and would be likely to recommend it to a friend. Satisfaction was moderately high (7.6).

Surveys were completed by 16 trained mediators. The majority believed that peer mediation was effective in helping students solve their interpersonal conflicts. All mediators answered that they believed a peer-based conflict resolution program at MLHS was very important. The satisfaction level with the program was the highest for this subject group (8.2).

Results

Surveys were filled out by 25 of the 30 faculty members. Of those 25 individuals, 100% were aware of the peer mediation program at Medical Lake High School. When asked how likely they would be to recommend peer mediation to students involved in a dispute during class, 60% (N=15) responded they were not likely, 28% (N=7) were likely, and only 12% (N=3) responded they would be very likely to do so. Only 32% (N=8) of the faculty had ever recommended peer mediation to students. Although the majority of the respondents had not recommended peer mediation and indicated they would not be likely to do so, 72% (N= 18) believed a peer-based conflict resolution program was somewhat important to have at the school. It was reportedly very important to 24% (N=6) of the faculty. The last item on the survey requested that subjects rate their overall satisfaction with the peer mediation program on a scale of 1 to 10. The range was 2 to 8, and the average was 5.5. This figure was based on 22 faculty responses as three subjects did not answer this question.

Two items on the survey were aimed at gathering thoughts about the program as well as suggestions for improvement. There were two general trends in the responses. One was that the staff members believed there was a lack of program information for the majority of individuals in the school. Suggestions included advertising the service and improving program details such as keeping better records, reporting results of mediations more frequently, and providing on-going training for students. One individual wrote, "It needs to be explained. I would like to see how the interaction is implemented. Who does the training? Who oversees the discussions, etc?" Another staff member wrote, "Not obvious enough for students to use when needed."

The second trend indicated staff members believed that the program was another positive alternative for students to solve their problems and potentially beneficial to the school. Comments included, "It gives us or the kids another method to help some kids;" "It is a very positive program;" "Keep it up."

A total of 165 students from eight randomly selected first period classrooms completed the survey. Of the 165 students, 69% (N=114) were reportedly aware of the peer mediation program at MLHS, while 29% (N=48) responded that they did not know the program existed. A total of three subjects did not answer this question. When asked who they would most likely go to for help if involved in a conflict, 67% (N=111) replied they would seek the help of a friend, and 12% (N=20) chose the category other, specifying a relative or working the problem out alone. The counselors were the choice of 9% (N=15) of the subjects, while the principal was selected by 4% (N=7). Peer mediation was listed as a first choice by 3% (N=5) of the subjects. Teachers were identified by fewer than 1% (N=1) of the respondents, and coaches were not identified at all (N=0). The majority of students surveyed knew about the peer mediation program, yet only 6% (N=11) reported they had used the service. This group of subjects was also asked to rate levels of satisfaction with the peer mediation program. The range was 1 to 10 with an average of 4.7.

Over half of the trained mediators (N=16) surveyed had directed a peer mediation at least once. When asked if a peer-based conflict resolution program was important for MLHS, 0% (N=0) reported that it was not important, 31% (N=5) said it was somewhat important, and 68% (N=11) believed it was very important. In helping students resolve interpersonal conflicts, 50% believed the peer mediation program was somewhat effective and 50% responded that it was very effective. The overall satisfaction rating of the program by mediators ranged from 5 to 10. The average level of satisfaction for trained mediators was 8.25.

One item on the survey asked mediators to provide opinions, comments, and suggestions for the program. Responses indicated that most mediators believed the program was effective but was not being used enough. Here are some of their responses:

" There is a big difference in having a peer as a mediator compared to an adult. Kids are more open in front of a classmate (an equal, than someone older)."

"I think it is good. We just need to be more organized. I don't know if it is because of PM, but the actual fighting level has gone down."

"I think that the program is effective, and I think that it needs to be more open so people will use it more."

"I think it's great. It helps students with peer problems, but I don't think too many students know about the program."

The last item asked the students to list personal benefits gained from training and experience as a peer mediator. Comments included:

"You learn to see things from the other person's point of view."

"Being trained as a mediator helped me to become more open-minded not only with mediation situations but with almost every situation dealing with people."

"None that have affected me now but later on in life, I believe it will help."

"Helping people resolve their problems makes me feel better about myself."

"Experience in learning how to deal with conflict is very nice to have."

The number of surveys completed by students who had used the peer mediation program totaled 39. Subjects were asked to indicate how instrumental the program was in helping settle their disputes. It was considered not useful by 18% (N=7) of the respondents, somewhat useful by 49% (N=19), and very useful by 31% (N=12). The item was left unanswered by one subject.

All disputants had formed an agreement with the individual(s) involved in the conflict. One survey item asked the students if their agreement was still in effect, and 64% (N=25) replied that it was. The subjects whose agreements did not last, made up 28% (N=11) of the responses. There were three subjects who did not complete this question.

Individuals were asked if they would use peer mediation again. There were 28% (N=11) who said they would use it in the future if involved in a conflict. Only 2.5% (N=1) indicated they would not use the program again, while 30.5% (N=12) responded that they might use peer mediation if involved in a similar situation again. There was a sizable number of subjects who did not answer this item (N=15). One survey item asked subjects if they would recommend peer mediation to a friend involved in an interpersonal conflict, and 49% (N=19) said they would, while 15% (N=6) responded that they would not. A total of 10 subjects did not answer this item. The average level of satisfaction with the program by students who had used it, ranged from 2 to 10 with an average of 7.6.

An item on the survey asked the students to write their thoughts regarding the peer mediation program. Here are some of the responses:

"It works and since there are a lot of conflicts at our school, it's helpful."

"It is ok. I don't like talking and bringing the problem in front of a lot of people. I like keeping it between the people involved (only)."

"It's helpful because you have to sit down and have time to think about the problem."

"Very helpful and I really enjoy being able to feel safe with this if I feel in danger or want to solve a problem without fighting."

"In some cases it might help but in mine, it didn't."

"I think that it is very helpful and then you can talk one on one. And you can most of the time get things under control."

"I don't like them. Lots of times they're one sided."

"It was helpful in settling the conflict at the time, enough for us to get past our anger and be able to talk about it on our own."

Discussion

Based on the results, some tentative conclusions can be made. Of the students representing the general body, 70% were aware that a peer mediation program existed, yet only 6% had ever used it to solve a problem. The overwhelming majority indicated that they would seek out the help of a friend if involved in a conflict. Perhaps students had heard about the program, but were not familiar with how it operated, what actually happens in a mediation, or how to request involvement in the program. Knowing that a program exists does not necessarily mean that students understand the purpose of it. On the other hand, it is possible that students were content with seeking friends for support and advice. It is possible the general student body did not see a need for such a program.

The concept of peers helping peers is appealing to faculty members, yet most had not recommended it to students, and many indicated they would not be likely to do so. There was a definite mixed message regarding faculty responses. All but one individual responded that a peer-based conflict resolution program was either somewhat or very important to have at MLHS, however, only three individuals said that they would be very likely to recommend it to students. Of the 25 faculty respondents, 15 said they were not likely to recommend peer mediation to students involved in a dispute during class. It is possible that faculty members liked the general concept of peer mediation, but had not been informed on how to refer students, when it was acceptable to refer students, and how the program worked. Many of the comments by faculty members indicated a need for advertisement for students as well as for faculty members.

Students who had used peer mediation reported that the program was useful to them, and most had maintained their agreements. The majority also reported they would at least consider using it again and almost half would recommend it to a friend. The average level of satisfaction with the program by students using peer mediation was 7.6. The figures from this subject group indicate that the program although new, has a promising future. It is safe to say that with all new programs,

there will be imperfections. The results from this group show that the essential goal of peer mediation, which is helping students resolve conflicts peacefully, is being met at a level which is positive. One possible conclusion is that the basis of the program is solid and has high potential for serving students effectively.

Almost all trained mediators believed the program was effective and important to MLHS. They reported a wide range of personal benefits from being involved with the program, such as increased levels of personal esteem and increased knowledge for handling conflicts. Many also listed school-wide benefits such as a perceived decreased level of fights at school. The average level of satisfaction for peer mediators was 8.2. This subject group was small in number but had the most experience and information about the peer mediation program due to attending a training program and directing mediations. Therefore, the positive opinions about the peer mediation program from this subject group indicate the program has the potential to help not only students in conflict, but those individuals who may have the opportunity to attend a training session.

The figures representing the average levels of satisfaction across the four subject groups indicate that direct involvement with the program is associated with higher levels of contentment. The average for students in home rooms was 4.7 and the average for faculty members was 5.2. The students using the program reported an average of 7.6 while the average for peer mediators was 8.2. The mediators and students using the program indicated that they had been directly involved with the program either in training, leading mediations, or by using mediation to solve a problem. Faculty members and students in random home rooms indicated little or no direct involvement with the program. Therefore, one possible conclusion is that people must be involved and have personal ownership to something before it becomes important to them.

The first hypothesis stated that students who had used peer mediation would have resolved interpersonal conflicts peacefully and would have maintained their agreements. Success was defined as 85% of agreements maintained. Survey results showed that 64% (N=25) did continue operating within the agreement guidelines, while 28% (N=11) did not. Although the percentage did not meet the success standard set at 85% of maintained agreements, the figures do indicate the program was beneficial for the majority of the students who used it.

The second hypothesis stated that there was broad based support across faculty and students for the peer mediation program. The trend across surveys indicated that the idea of having a conflict resolution program was favorable. Many responses indicated however, that a lack of information may have hindered the use of the program. Faculty members clearly believed the concept was important, yet reported a low level of interaction. Results indicate that the idea of a peer mediation program has support in the abstract but in terms of concrete use, faculty and students are not committed.

Students from random home rooms represented the subject group with the lowest level of support for the program. The majority of students were aware the program existed and usually chose friends to help with a conflict. The level of satisfaction was also quite low. With only 6% having actually used the program, the lack of support may be a direct result of insufficient information.

Using peer mediation in the future, recommending it to friends, and an above average level of satisfaction indicated that students who had used peer mediation were supportive of the program. Peer mediators also displayed a higher level of support for the program. All subjects believed the program was somewhat or very effective as well as somewhat or very important. The average satisfaction level of the group was 8.2. It is possible that being trained as mediators and learning to be responsible for the program increases the potential level of support for the program.

Overall support for the program is lacking. Although the mediators and students who have used the program are in favor, they represent only a small number of the total student body. Based on the responses from the general student body, the program is working for a low percentage of individuals.

One potential problem for any program is total acceptance by the individuals who implement it. It is not uncommon for programs to exist without being challenged, evaluated, or monitored. Assumptions that they are working and meeting the desired goals lead to programs that are nothing more than accepted fads. In time, other programs come along to take the place of one that may have worked if given some critical evaluation. A list of recommendations have been provided to increase the life of the peer mediation program at Medical Lake High School and to increase its effectiveness. After one year, the program appears to have the potential to provide a strong service to the students and faculty members at Medical Lake High School.

Recommendations

Include more advertising. This could consist of posters in the hall, announcements in the bulletin, a mock peer mediation during an assembly to demonstrate the purpose and process, as well as having mediators talk to students in home rooms about the program.

Include more faculty members and more students in future peer mediation training sessions.

Update faculty members on the progress of the program by providing information about the number of students using it and the percentage of students who formed agreements in mediations.

Provide referral sheets to teachers, allowing them to formally recommend a student to a mediation.

Encourage counselors, principals, and faculty members to refer students to the program.

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